THEORIES OF MODERN ART

A Source Book by Artists and Critics

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VII DADA, SURREALISM AND *SCUOLA METAFISICA*: The Irrational and the Dream

INTRODUCTION: Dada and Surrealism

Surrealism may be described in two quite different ways: in the broadest philosophic sense, as one of the important poles toward which art and thought have always been drawn, and specifically, as the ideology of an organized group of artists and writers who from about 1924 on gathered about André Breton in Paris. It is to this latter group that we owe the term Surrealism itself, and to a large extent the recognition of its earlier manifestations.

The broad meaning represents a significant constituent of human feeling, a love for the world of dreams and of fantasy. In Walter Friedlaender's duality of rational-irrational, this is the realm of the irrational; it depends upon inspiration rather than upon rules, and it values the free play of the individual imagination rather than the codification of the ideals of society or of history. With the artists who tended toward this pole in the historic past, such as Hieronymous Bosch, Salvator Rosa, Goya, etc., the free element of fantasy is only a part of a total concept which is basically traditional. That is, the class of subject matter chosen by the artist and his mode of visualizing it are dependent upon tradition and are similar to those of other contemporary artists. The unconventional element, fantasy, is secondary to the larger conventional framework of the work of art. The twentieth-century Surrealist group, on the contrary, sought to revolutionize art completely so that both the kinds of subjects represented and the stylistic coherence of the painting itself were to be unconventional if not actually fantastic. Furthermore, the group was given support by a large body of Surrealist literature and theory, much of it based upon the methods and the findings of psychoanalysis.

The Surrealist movement was anticipated by an earlier "proto-Surrealist" group called by the nonsense term Dada. Formed in 1916 in Zurich by French and German youths, who had they remained in their own countries would have been drafted into the army, Dada was a movement of negation. The young artists were appalled by the violence of the war be-

tween their countries, but at the same time they could not regret the disruption of the conventional society that had ignored the many new art movements of the age.

Their response took the form of an insurrection against all that was pompous, conventional, or even boring in the arts. In general, they admired "nature," in the sense of being natural, and they opposed all formulas imposed by man. Jean Arp wrote in his diary that his aim was "to destroy the rationalist swindle for man and incorporate him again humbly in nature." Hugo Ball attacked with satire the "language devastated and made impossible by journalists." The Dadaists composed and read nonsense poems, sang, and argued in the nihilistic spirit which was their reaction to the holocaust of the war. Unlike the Surrealists, they had neither a leader, nor a theory, nor an organized group. Only in 1918, after nearly three years of activity, was a manifesto written, and even then the author, Tristan Tzara, made no pretense of explaining the movement.

The movement was founded by Hugo Ball (1886–1927), a German actor and playwright, in a music hall, the Cabaret Voltaire, operated by him in Zurich. He was soon joined in the festivities by Jean Arp (1887–1966), an Alsatian artist anxious to avoid serving in the army of the Kaiser; Tristan Tzara (1886–1963), a Rumanian poet; Marcel Janco (b. 1895), a Rumanian artist; and Richard Huelsenbeck (b. 1892), a German poet. At the age of 29, Arp already had an international reputation as an artist. He had shown his work in 1912 with the *Blaue Reiter* in Munich and in 1913 in the first *Herbstsalon* in Berlin; he had lived in Paris in 1904, and also around 1914 where he had been associated with Picasso and Apollinaire; and he was acquainted with Max Ernst, who was to become the initiator of Dada in Cologne. Arp had written poetry since his youth, and he contributed both poetry and illustrations to the many Dada publications. The reviews, *Cabaret Voltaire* and *Dada*, were highly eclectic, including original and revolutionary articles by Apollinaire and Marinetti as well as those by the Dadaists themselves. Their exhibitions showed work by revolutionary painters of many various movements, such as De Chirico, Ernst, Kandinsky, Picabia, Kokoschka, Marc, and Picasso.

But even before Dada was founded, Marcel Duchamp (b. 1887) in Paris had anticipated its light-hearted assaults on traditional ideas. While in New York during World War I, he continued working on a series of "Ready-Mades," which have now become a kind of touchstone for the contemporary admiration for commonplace and junk objects. He was extremely active in America, editing several reviews, making an abstract film, and inventing word games, all of which was done in a spirit of

good-humored irony akin to that of the Zurich group. Duchamp actually produced very little—a few paintings, drawings and fragmentary writings—yet his superior intelligence and his refined sensibility provided a wealth of associated meaning for each of his works, even when, as with the "Ready-Mades," he did nothing to the object except to present it for contemplation. With the decline in the spontaneous creativity that had attended the beginnings of Dada, Duchamp in 1923 abandoned painting for more purely intellectual activities, such as chess, and for experiments in optics and mechanics. But the perceptiveness of his observations on the problem of art versus "non-art" shaped many of the conceptions of contemporary painting and sculpture.

Francis Picabia (1879–1952), was, like Duchamp, a congenital anarchist and Dadaist in the broadest meaning of the term. He seemed to appear, like a political agitator, at whatever place there was any possibility of subverting with his wit any false dignity or conventionality in art, and he was ready to incite any latent Dadaist tendencies. He was several years older than the men of the Zurich Dada group, who were all in their twenties, and had achieved a substantial reputation as a painter of Impressionist pictures, a career which he abruptly rejected before 1912 in order to paint quasi-Dadaist pictures. These paintings with nonsense titles (*Catch as Catch Can* and *Infant Carburetor*) were among the first abstractions ever created. He went to New York in 1913 to witness the great impact created by the Armory Show on American art. He remained there to inject a proto-Dada spirit into Alfred Stieglitz's review, *Camera Work*, and later into *291*, the journal of Stieglitz's gallery. He founded in 1916 in Barcelona a counterpart, *391*, which he published intermittently from wherever he might be working. It was not until 1916 that he joined the official Dada group in Zurich, and in the next year he participated in the first Dada demonstrations in Paris.

Dadaism, which had always been fervently internationalist, spread rapidly throughout Europe at the end of the war. In 1919 Arp assisted his old friend Max Ernst (b. 1891) to launch Dada in his home town of Cologne. Their first exhibition the next year created a perfect Dadaist situation, stirring up such a scandal that it was closed by the police upon the order of a magistrate who was Ernst's own uncle. The Dada spirit broke out in Hanover in 1923 under the leadership of Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), who was joined by men like El Lissitzky, refugees from the new reactionary artistic policies of the Soviets, and also by the Dutchmen Mondrian and Van Doesberg. Again, Arp was present to fan the flames of artistic anarchy. Schwitter's title for the Hanover movement was *Merz* (literally, something cast-off, like junk),

which he also gave to his collage-paintings and to an extremely lively review that he edited. During the long life of the review from 1923 until 1932, he published articles on a wide variety of *avant-garde* subjects, such as child art and Russian Constructivism. In Berlin Dada sprang from the activities of the galleries and the journal of *Der Sturm*, which before the war had launched the German Expressionists. It was initiated by Huelsenbeck, who in 1918 returned from Zurich to Berlin and there drew George Grosz and Raoul Hausmann into the movement. The Berlin group promoted the huge international Dada exhibition of 1920, the largest yet shown.

The finale of Dada as a group activity came about in 1921, by which time all the initiators had been drawn to Paris. Here in 1920 André Breton (1896–1966) had staged a great Dada soiree at the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre*, combining an art exhibition with a public reading of Dadaist writings by Picabia. The last issues of *391* appeared in Paris, and Breton's own review *Littérature*, founded in 1919, was no longer the official organ of the movement. The original spontaneous character of Dada degenerated into public demonstrations, violent arguments, and actual riots, while maintaining to the end its character of complete freedom of expression.

The Surrealist movement was composed of a highly organized group of writers and artists, most of them former Dadaists, who in 1924 rallied about Breton in Paris when he issued his Surrealist Manifesto. This group was quite different in structure and attitude from the Dadaists with their spontaneous meetings in the Cabaret Voltaire. It had a strong identity as a closed group obedient to doctrinaire theories; it was dominated by the person and the ideas of Breton; and it was motivated by an avalanche of totally new and stimulating ideas flowing from Breton's interpretation of Freud's experiments. The members of the group were prolific writers, and they issued an enormous body of articles, novels, essays, propaganda brochures, and several manifestoes. The larger part of their theoretical writing was concerned with experiments and studies of methods, some of them drawn from psychology, whereby they could stimulate the subconscious mind to yield some of its limitless store of fantastic and dreamlike images. They had a deep respect for scientific method, especially that of psychology; they fully accepted the reality of the physical world, even though they believed that they had gone so deeply into it that they had transcended it; and they believed in a close interrelationship between their art and revolutionary elements in society.

The result of all these factors—a closed group, a powerful leader, and a doctrine—was the creation of a revolutionary spirit that sought first to

clear the field by the total derangement of all the conventions of art as they were then known. Breton named as the ideological precursors of the movement Lautréamont, Freud, and Trotsky. Each of these men had in his own field—literature, the study of man in his most intimate aspect, and the study of social and political organisms—revolutionized modern life from its very roots. Breton, called the "Pope of Surrealism," proposed an equally dynamic role for Surrealism.

Surrealism had its ideological origins specifically in Freud's methods, which gave the artists a model for their own investigations, and which revealed to them a new world of fantastic images from the subconscious. The authority of Freud's theories also gave support to Breton's statement in the Manifesto: "I believe in the future transmutation of these two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality . . . ."

They also found authority for their revolutionary theories in Hippolyte Taine's studies of intelligence, made in the 1860s. Taine had undermined the Realists' faith in the concrete reality of sense impressions by asserting that sensation was not a fact at all but actually a hallucination.[1]

In their eagerness to understand more of the new world of the subconscious mind that they were exploring and also the new concept of man that they were creating, the Surrealists even denied the value of art except as a means to achieve those ends. They were in a sense actually anti-poetry and anti-art, in the usual meaning of these terms. Breton once said about Surrealist painting: "It is not a question of drawing, it is simply a question of tracing," meaning that art was only the means of recording the visible configurations of images that existed in the subconscious.

The direct effect of such influences on the Surrealist poets was seen in the method of "automatic writing." In this exercise, when all controls by the conscious mind were released, the marvelous and boundless world of

[1] It is interesting and significant that, although both the Symbolists and Surrealists clearly participated in the irrational mode and shared a taste for fantasy and the images of dreams they held almost diametrically opposite opinions of Taine's theories of art. Taine was convinced that art, as one of the several activities of man, was closely related to and dependent upon the conditions of life of the artist and upon the nature of his society. G.-Albert Aurier, the leading Symbolist art critic, vigorously rejected this point of view as an outdated remnant of mid-nineteenth-century materialism, which because of its dependence upon practical affairs denied the artist his inspiration from spiritual sources. On the contrary, André Breton saw in it scientific justification for the collaboration of psychiatry and art, whereby art, precisely because it was so intimately a part of man and his society, became, like psychiatry, one of the techniques for examining those sources. Thus, while for one generation Taine's theories stultified art, for the next they led it to the very source of its inspiration.

images of the subconscious could flow to the surface. The writer had only by various means to shock himself free from these controls and then automatically to record whatever thoughts and images presented themselves. The same method for the painter produced "automatic drawings." Surrealism as a movement thus was much broader in scope than either literature or painting, and was, in the words of Breton, "pure psychic automatism."

Surrealism, being initially a movement of literary men, looked for its literary antecedents to Baudelaire and Poe among the Romantics, Rimbaud and Mallarmé among the Symbolists, and to Apollinaire as its immediate precursor in the twentieth century. It was indeed Apollinaire who in 1917 had given the movement its name when he chose as a subtitle for his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* the term, *drame surréaliste*, in preference to the usual word, *surnaturaliste*. It looked back, in painting, to the great fantasts and painters of imaginary subjects, to the Romantics and Symbolists and, farther afield, to the sculpture of primitive peoples, especially the fantastic figures and masks of Oceania. Surrealism also claimed contemporary artists who, even though having nothing to do with the movement, worked in styles and created images in a spirit similar to those of the group. Such artists as Picasso, Braque, Klee, and Chagall were at different times claimed by them and had their work reproduced in Surrealist publications. Marc Chagall's (b. 1887) work manifests many characteristics of Surrealism, and he had upon many occasions encountered the group. And yet, although he is very articulate and literate, and was at one time a Commissar of Fine Arts under the Bolshevik regime, the naïveté of his mind and work is so natural and unprogrammatic that his own statements on his art have nothing to do with Surrealist theory or with what the Surrealists said about him.

Since both art and literature were considered only means of implementing the Surrealist spirit, theoretical controversies soon arose on the question of whether there can actually be such a thing as Surrealist painting. In reply, Breton wrote a series of articles, published in 1928 as the book *Surréalisme et la Peinture*, in which he spoke only of Surrealism *and* painting, citing as examples the artists of the group, but also such disparate artists as Picasso, Braque, Matisse, and Klee. (He included among the illustrations 15 works each by Picasso and De Chirico, but only 10 by Ernst, 8 each by Masson and Miro, 6 each by Tanguy, Arp, and Man Ray, and 1 by Picabia.)

The attraction of Breton and his circle of literary colleagues, together with their theories of art, was so great that by the time of the first exhibition of Surrealist art in 1925, all the major artists who were to become orthodox Surrealists had joined, with the exception of several younger men who had

not yet come into contact with the group. Even prior to this Breton had laid down the basis for the organization of the group and for the theory. He had studied with Freud, was experienced as a military psychiatrist, and was eager to apply his knowledge to literature and to painting. He had made a study of his own dreams, and he had experimented with automatic writing as early as 1920, the results of which appear in his book, *Les Champs magnétiques*. He worked with Max Ernst about 1922 on experiments in automatism in both writing and drawing, and his theories on the method for inducing hallucinations by exciting the sensibilities were probably partially responsible for Ernst's method of *frottage*. His manifesto of 1924 had rallied the poets under the new banner of Freud, and the first exhibition of painting in 1925 gathered the Dada painters together with Joan Miro, André Masson, Man Ray, and Pierre Roy. In the next year the Galerie Surréaliste opened, presenting paintings and photographs by the American Man Ray alongside primitive Oceanic sculpture from Breton's collection.[2]

The painters constituting the group came from various backgrounds, but they had already in their earlier experiences shared tendencies toward fantasy in their art. Joan Miro (b. 1893 near Barcelona) had submitted to many influences before his adherence to Surrealism: Fauvism in his youth in Spain, Cubism in 1919 after his acquaintance with Picasso in Paris, and Dada by the time of the last great Dada exhibition in 1922. Nevertheless, his natural innocence and simplicity made him thoroughly and for his entire career a true Surrealist, causing Breton to say that Miro was "possibly the most Surrealist of us all." Although André Masson (b. 1896) had passed through a Cubist period under the influence of Juan Gris just before encountering the Surrealists in 1924, he found an immediate accord with them. At the same time he became interested in the great mystical writers and artists, especially Blake, Nietzsche, and Kafka. Despite the fact that Masson's drawings are in the plastic realm the closest parallel to the automatic writing of the poets, he resisted the literary interpretations given to his work by the poets. He insisted that a painting had a plastic value which lay in the realm of visual art and was independent of the value of the ideas and images brought up from the subconscious. For these heretical beliefs, which recalled the despised Cubist art theory, Breton in the pages of *La Révue Surréaliste* of 1929 repudiated Masson, although the suspension was only temporary. Yves Tangúy (1900–1955), after wandering from one activity to another for

[2] It is interesting to compare the admiration felt by Breton and the Surrealists for the fantastic forms and colors of South Pacific art with the Cubists' admiration for the more constructive and rationally composed African sculpture.

Max Ernst, Self-Portrait, 1920 photomontage.

several years during his youth, underwent a conversion that was thoroughly Surrealist in spirit. Upon first seeing an early De Chirico painting in the window of Paul Guillaume's shop, he had a revelation that he should become a painter. Shortly after this experience he made his first visit to Breton and was converted to Surrealism. He participated in all of its activities, being associated particularly with the method of drawing called *Corps exquis*, in which several persons each contributed portions of a common drawing without having seen what the others had done (see example, illustrated). Man Ray (b. 1890) was an American painter who came to Paris and to Dada in 1921 after having been well prepared by his participation with Duchamp in Dadaist activities in New York. Because he was best known for having injected the Dada-Surrealist spirit into photography, he became known as the "machine-poet," and his photographs and paintings appear reproduced in the pages of *La Révue Surréaliste* more often than the work of any other artist.

Even before Breton had founded the movement, he had discovered an artist whom he considered to be the supreme example of a Surrealist painter, Giorgio De Chirico (b. 1888 in Greece). Furthermore, De Chirico had painted the works that interested Breton the most—the dreamy and ominous piazzas and arcades of empty Italian cities—between 1911 and

1917, before the existence of either Surrealism or Dada, and apparently with no contact with any of the artists who were so important later for the movement. De Chirico was born of Italian parents in Greece, and spent his youth in Munich, where he was deeply impressed by Nietzsche, Richard Wagner, and where he was influenced by the paintings of Arnold Böcklin and Max Klinger. James T. Soby, in his biography, states that the young Italian encountered the idea of the symbolical dream picture from a study of Nietzsche, an influence that was reinforced by both men's infatuation for north Italian cities, especially Turin. It is easy to understand Breton's interest in De Chirico's paintings, so full of childhood memories and expressing a mood so troubling in its awesome symbols. Breton declared that there were two fixed points for Surrealism: Lautréamont in literature and De Chirico in painting. De Chirico's extensive writings, which include a novel, numerous articles, and an autobiography, are themselves highly valued as literature, and like his painting they belong to the realm of dreams. But as might be expected, this artist, who had had little contact with other artists, scarcely any relationships outside his own family, and who had an obsessive dependence upon his mother, found it extremely difficult to effect any personal relationships with a group as vociferous and inquisitive as the Surrealists. Not only did the association turn into bitter denunciations on both sides, but De Chirico precipitated a complete break in 1933 by renouncing all of his paintings of the early period—the only ones admired by the Surrealists.

The last major artist to join the group was Salvador Dali (b. 1904 near Barcelona). He was extremely precocious as a child, showing decided symptoms of an overexcited state of mind and being given to violent hysterical outbursts. In later life he became obsessed with memories of these early experiences and transcribed them into his paintings. Even his earliest work, produced when he was still in Madrid and Barcelona, was influenced by major *avant-garde* movements, at first by Futurism and *Pittura Metafisica* and later by Surrealism. Before going to Paris and meeting Breton's group, he had already learned about and experimented with the literal transcription of dreams into painting. In 1929 he went to Paris and was at once caught up in Surrealist activity. He studied and was influenced by the early De Chirico, Ernst, and Tanguy, and in 1929 with Luis Buñuel he made the first Surrealist motion picture, *Un Chien Andalou*, today one of the classics of the experimental cinema. He also added to the list of historical precursors of Surrealism by "discovering" *Art Nouveau* and the fantastic architecture of his countryman, Antoni Gaudi. He studied closely the method and discoveries of Freud, and invented his own method of forcing creation by means of what he called

"paranoiac-critical activity," which is described in his book, *La Femme Visible* of 1930.[3] This method went a stage beyond those of even the most radical of the group, for Dali proposed a state of mind that was permanently disoriented from the outside world. Wallace Fowlie describes this method as that of a madman, and no longer that of the somnambulist. Although Dali was later excommunicated from the group by Breton, his extraordinary brilliance as a theoretician and his rich invention injected new energy and ideas into the movement at the moment when it was beginning to lose its initial impetus.

During the 'thirties Surrealism dominated poetry and painting in Europe and exerted an influence upon the work of virtually every major artist everywhere. A second manifesto had been issued in 1929, and numerous large exhibitions were arranged in major cities of the world. Most of the Surrealist group took refuge in New York during World War II, but while they continued to call themselves Surrealists and to stage exhibitions, the disruption of 1940 was the final one. But by this time they had seen Breton's prediction come true. The Surrealist spirit had indeed revolutionized the arts, penetrated social theory, and it continues to dominate the theater and films. Surrealism has thus become a major period in history while its influence continues to be very strongly felt in contemporary art.

[3] See Andre Breton's summary of Dali's method in his essay "What is Surrealism?" (below), and Max Ernst's criticism of it in his "On Frottage" (below).